STORIES: EAST AND WEST

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Touching tributes to two greats of the contemporary church; one you will have heard of; the other, perhaps, not.
Category: Observations

I recently learned that Eugene Peterson, author, pastor and Bible translator, passed away. At the same time, I was also reflecting on the death of a cherished and esteemed leader of the church in the Middle Eastâ€"Ghassan Khalaf, pastor, mentor, theologian and Bible translator who also served long years as the president of ABTS. My mind began to link the two men even though, as far as I know, they never met or interacted. It struck me that these two pastor-scholars represented the best of what Evangelicalism has to offer in both East and West.

Within twenty-four hours of Ghassan Khalafâ€™s death, my FaceBook page overflowed with photos of him with his many students and mentees. It was stunning to see the depth of appreciation and respect. It seemed Middle Eastern leaders were lining up to declare this man their mentor.

Similarly, Eugene Petersonâ€™s death provoked a deluge of online tributes from pastors, theologians and missionaries, many relating how he carried on an extensive mentorship through hand-written letters and phone calls. Both men were role-models and mentors, men who said through their lives â€œfollow my example as I follow Christâ€™s.â€

I think all who knew Pastor Ghassan might agree that his most satisfying hours were spent poring over the Biblical text, examining the intricacies (and mistranslations) of the classic Van Dyck Arabic version, comparing them with his own translations and bringing out the depth of his knowledge in both expository sermons and classroom lectures. (His lectures were always marked by personal anecdote and story.) Â As I understand, he was working on a new edition of the Arabic Bible in his final weeks.

Eugene Peterson, likewise, was renowned for his translation of the Bible into contemporary English idiom. *The Message,* (the title of Petersonâ€™s translation) became an instant best-seller and brought the message of Scripture to life for scholar, church-attender and curious reader alike.Â Both men loved Scripture, treasuring it as the word of God. They labored in it with joy and abandon. Both communicated it in the idiom of their societies.

Both men were devoted churchmen, widely published authors and pastor-scholars of the highest order. In addition to his role at ABTS, Ghassan Khalaf served long years as the pastor of Hadath Baptist Church (now Resurrection Church Beirutâ€"the current pastor is a spiritual son of Pastor Ghassan). His pastoral gifting extended far beyond the walls of that church. He was known as the pastorâ€™s pastor to his students and other Christian leaders throughout the Arab world. When word of his death reached Sudan, a contingent of Sudanese leaders gathered to honor him hundreds of miles away. Small wonder as he loved to remind them that he too was Sudanese. Egyptians and North Africans, Syrians and Iraqis and people from many nations felt the fatherly care of Pastor Ghassan. It is rare to find in one so gifted as a pastor and shepherd, the mind of a scholar. Yet that was true of Ghassan Khalaf. His was no dry academia nor was his pastoral side all tenderness with no mental toughness. This rare combination gave him an inestimable value to Middle Eastern Christians and caused us to feel his loss keenly.

Eugene Peterson could have easily taken his skills and gifts into academia and, at one point, desired to do so. But his journey led him into the pastoral ministry where he powerfully set a new standard for the pastoral call in a church environment awash in pragmatism, relativism and utilitarianism. Peterson set a radical new tone for pastors in the US which reverberated around the world. His church was small comparatively, yet he was never seduced by bigness or mass marketing. He wanted to know his people and to know their namesâ€"all of them. Perhaps that explains why he stayed in the same church for twenty-nine years! He eschewed the presumed American value that â€œbigger is betterâ€ and made his mark by ministering deeply to a smaller congregation. One of his many published works is titled simply *The Pastorâ€"*a clarion call to the pastoral ministry that has influenced an entire generation of pastors in the US and beyond.

There is another quality that these two men share, at least in my mind. It is that they were versatile men who could embrace the breadth and diversity of the church while also speaking winsomely to the watching world. Evangelical churches of the Middle East (and the West) are often stretched out of their comfort zone in order to open their hearts to receive new believers from other backgrounds. It applies to those of Islamic and Druze backgrounds and to a lesser degree, perhaps, those who come from the traditional Orthodox and Catholic churches of the Middle East. Pastor Ghassan was adept at crossing those boundary lines. I know many believers from Islamic background who viewed him as their spiritual Father. His scholarship and spiritual insight also gave him favor among the various Christian confessions of the Middle East. He was ecumenical in the best sense of the word.

Similarly, Peterson, though he was a longtime Presbyterian pastor, became a sought- after speaker and author who crossed denominational and confessional lines with ease. Beyond that, his penchant for spiritual formation drew the interest of many spiritual seekers in the decadent west. He was an unusual blendâ€"a man who appealed to his Evangelical constituency but also gave that constituency plausibility in the eyes of serious secular observers. We could use more like himâ€¦and like Pastor Ghassan.

In these two men of God who have now left us, we have two examples of the best that Evangelicalism can offer in East and West. We are painfully aware that Evangelicalism, as a moniker and a community, has fallen on hard times, beleaguered by its political associations, compromised by its culture wars. At such a moment, Evangelicals may be tempted to abandon their tribe for greener pastures and more winsome affiliations. It is those same political affiliations that can drive a wedge between Evangelicalism in the East and West. In our struggle to find commonality, we question if there can be any Evangelical unity. Nevertheless, when leaders arise who represent the best of our tradition, they become a banner the rest of us can rally around. Ghassan Khalaf and Eugene Peterson leave a legacy of evangelicalism that is both scholarly and personal, broad and deep, authentic to the core. It is an Evangelicalism that can flourish in East and West as it holds forth the beauty and truth of Christ and his gospel. May God give us grace to follow in their train.

This post first appeared on the blog of the Arab Baptist Theological Seminary.